# Inflationary effects in language and elsewhere

ÖSTEN DAHL

*Stockholm University*

Inflation is a well-known phenomenon to most of us. Together with unemployment, inflation is one of the diseases typical of modern economies. However, inflationary processes are not restricted to the economic sphere in the proper sense. Consider for instance the English words *gentleman* and *lady*, which in their original meaning denoted persons from the nobility, which today are often used synonymously to *man* and *woman.* Similar stories can be told about titles in many languages. In Swedish, a number of different words are used for unmarried women, such as *jungfru*, *fröken*, *mamsell*; they all seem to have been used initially for high-status women, but later became general titles for unmarried women and, in some cases, they have finally even obtained a derogatory character. Intuitively, we may say that titles tend to lose their "value" over time, but exactly what is the parallel with monetary value here?

Many titles such as *lord* or *professor* are connected with a certain status in society; they guarantee the bearer certain rights and privileges and the respect of others. If, for instance, a king confers a title on one of his subjects, the effects are similar to the ones that would obtain if the king gave him or her a piece of land or a sum of money. But there is a crucial difference between the piece of land on one hand and the title or the money on the other. The value connected with the title and the money is purely conventional. That is, there must be something in the world that corresponds to the title or to the sum of money, but what that is depends on a convention. In some cases, the lack of a real-world counterpart to an object with a conventional value will lead to an immediate crisis. If I try to sell two-hundred tickets to a theater with one hundred seats I will quite soon be in serious trouble. When the relationship between the object and what it "buys" in the world is less direct, however, there is always a temptation to multiply the conventionally-valued objects to obtain a short-term gain. A king may thus buy the loyalty of a number of people by making them into, say, "Grand Dukes". But if the number of Grand Dukes in the country doubles, the value of that title is bound to decrease.

Conferring a title, or doing other similar things, such as giving medals and orders, is usually "cheap" for the person who does it. Similarly, it is always tempting for someone who controls the issuing of banknotes in a country to get short-term advantages by printing more money. Such actions, however, are basically self-destructive in that the increase in the number of bearers of a title, or in the amount of money in circulation, influences the value of the "symbolic commodity", resulting in inflation.

Similar things are going on in everyday communication. Thus, titles are not necessarily conferred by kings but are used by people all the time in talking to and about each other. Although the use of titles is normally governed by conventions to a large extent, there is often leeway for the choice between different ways of addressing or referring to people. Also, there is usually a "penalty" for using a title that is too low, but while more rarely a "penalty" for using a title which is too high. On the contrary, you may sometimes "buy" a positive reaction from someone by over-titling him or her. In fact, such over-titling is sometimes conventionalized. When academic titles were more commonly used in Sweden than they are today, it was customary to "promote" academics when addressing them. Thus, a person with the lower "licentiate" degree would quite regularly be called "Doctor". In the long run, however, such policies inevitably lead to the depreciation of titles and thus to the introduction of new ones.

The use of evaluative expressions like *excellent* and *good* may work in a similar way. A teacher may want to give her students positive feedback and she tells them their work is "excellent". But if such an expression is used indiscriminately, that is, if everyone is told their work is excellent, the expression loses its informational value and eventually has to be replaced by another expression.

As noted by Haspelmath (forthcoming), inflation is an "invisible-hand phenomenon", to use a term originating with Adam Smith and made popular in linguistics by Keller (1994). This means that inflation is the unintended result of intentional actions. Inflationary phenomena depend on a conflict between the short-term interests of agents and the long-term functioning of the system. Inflation thus is a clear example of a counter-adaptive process: elements of a system become less functional over time and eventually have to be replaced (e.g., by currency reform or the introduction of new titles, etc.) At the same time, it governs the life-cycles of symbolic entities such as currencies and titles.

Inflationary phenomena are readily observable in grammaticalization processes. Let us look at a particularly straightforward case. In Mandarin Chinese, scalar predicates such as *kuài* 'fast' are quasi-obligatorily modified by the intensifier *hěn*, whose traditional meaning is 'very' (Ansaldo 1999: 93). Thus, while (1) is felt to be rather odd except in some special contexts, (2) is now the normal way of saying 'He is fast':

(1) Tā kuài
he fast

(2) Tā hěn kuài
he very fast

In fact, when asked to translate English sentences containing the word *very*, speakers tend to resort to other intensifiers such as *fēicháng* 'extremely'. The word *hăn* has thus undergone a shift, in which it has moved from being an intensifying modifier to being an obligatory part of the scalar predicate construction. It is plausible to assume that the initial driving force of such a process is speakers' desire to maximize the rhetorical effect of their statements. Saying that *x is very fast* is *ceteris paribus* bound to be more interesting, newsworthy, astonishing, etc. than the plain statement that *x is fast*. But again, this may lead to unintentional long-term effects. If some speakers start using stronger expressions, others may have to follow suit, in order not to be left behind in the rhetorical game. This may explain why a modifier such as *hěn* becomes obligatory. Also, since the over-use of expressions leads to a loss in rhetorical strength, new expressions have to be invented for the cases when a strong effect is really needed.

Another type of inflationary effect is observed in the "devaluation" of emphatic constructions. A very general tendency behind a number of common types of grammaticalization processes is for emphatic constructions of various kinds to be over-used in the sense that they come to replace their non-emphatic counterparts. The most famous of these is perhaps "Jespersen's Cycle", the process by which emphatic negation constructions such as French *ne . . . pas*, with the original meaning 'not a step', become the standard way of negating sentences, with the ensuing loss of the original emphatic force. This motivates, on one hand, the phonetic reduction of the morphemes entering into the negation construction, on the other, the introduction of new emphatic constructions to fill the functional gap.

Often, however, we may observe "devaluation" of expressions of a slightly different kind, where it is less obvious that the notion of inflation as used in economics is applicable. Let us first look at a non-linguistic parallel.

Once upon a time alcoholic beverages could not be served in Swedish restaurants if they were not part of a meal, that is, you had to order some food with your drink. The natural strategy on the part of a thirsty guest was of course to miminize the meal that had to be ordered. It is said that special "token sandwiches" were introduced for this purpose. One may imagine that these were not exactly culinary wonders.

What this example illustrates is what happens when a rule of some sort interferes with an agent's cost-benefit calculations. I go to the restaurant because I am thirsty; I am prepared to pay the price that is demanded for the drink I order. However, the

state forces me to also pay for some food that I do not really want. From my point of view, this regulation is tantamount to taxation: I simply have to pay more for the drink than if the regulation did not exist. My reaction, as we have seen, is to reduce the extra cost as much as possible—I do not care if the sandwich I get is edible or not, I don't want it anyway.

Returning now to linguistics, a suitable area to look for the effects of conventionalization is that of politeness phenomena, which are more obvious in hierarchically-structured societies. When speaking to superiors, a person of lower rank may be expected to add the title of the person s/he is speaking to, not just once in a conversation but all the time. Thus, in pre-revolutionary Russia, the word *sudar′* 'sir' was routinely added after an utterance in this way. After a while, speakers started to pronounce this word less distinctly and, in the end, it was reduced to a single fricative *-s*: *da-s* 'yes, sir'. But politeness phenomena are not the only place where similar processes take place. A persistent feature of grammaticalization is that linguistic items come to be used in contexts where they are redundant in the sense of not contributing any information that is new to the listener or they are irrelevant in the sense of not being part of the intended message. For instance, possessive markers are obligatory with certain types of relational nouns (body part terms and kinship terms) in many languages, although precisely with these nouns the identity of the possessor tends to be predictable (Dahl and Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1998): thus, in English a possessive pronoun is obligatory in a construction such as *I hurt my leg*, although the same message would be readily understandable without the possessive and indeed is expressed in that way in many other languages. Tense morphemes give information about temporal reference even when that information is derivable from previous context or even indicated by an adverbial in the same sentence, etc.

A somewhat different example of the development of a redundant pattern in language is provided by "synonymic compounds", that is, compound nouns in which the components are synonymous and thus express the same information. Such compounds are common in many languages and appear to be an areal phenomenon characteristic of the eastern part of the Eurasian continent (Wälchli manuscript). Some examples from Uzbek are *toat-ibodatda* 'worship-worship > worship', *to'la-to'kis* 'full-full > full', and *oziq-ovqat* 'food-food > food' (where the second component is from Arabic). Apparently what has happened is that such patterns become conventionalized and become the normal way of expressing certain concepts.

To see the parallel between the linguistic examples and the "token sandwich" in Swedish restaurants, we have to consider what kind of "cost-benefit calculation" a speaker makes. The speaker of an utterance usually wants to convey a certain amount of information—the "message". In order to do so, s/he has to spend a certain amount of resources—time and energy. A politeness "rule" like the one that

forces him/her to add an extra element to the utterance, whether or not it is needed for the message, increases the "cost"—the amount of time and energy spent—without necessarily giving any extra benefits. In the same way as the thirsty Swede tried to get away with the least costly meal possible, the speaker reduces the time and energy spent on the politeness item, leaving only what is necessary for him/her still being considered to having uttered it.

In this connection, it may be relevant to mention the quote from Schlegel (1818) in Heine *et al.* (1991),[1] which shows an early example of the money metaphor in discussing processes of grammaticalization. Schlegel says that some words are deprived of their semantic force and left with a nominal value; they thus become a kind of "paper money", which "facilitates their circulation". Although the formulation is suggestive, it is not entirely clear (to me at least) what kind of mechanism Schlegel was talking about. However, what comes to mind here is what economists call "Gresham's Law", or the principle that "bad money drives out good": if two objects have the same conventional value assigned to them, an agent in a commercial exchange will prefer to use the one with the lower "real" value. This eventually leads to the disappearance of the more highly valued items from circulation. The parallel to what goes on in communication is that if there are two ways of saying the same thing, the one which is less "costly", that is, in the normal case, shorter and easier to pronounce, will win.

In the study of animal communication, the term "ritualization" is used for the use of behaviors disconnected from their original purpose, in particular, for the development of "display behavior", such as when an animal signals its intention to perform an action (e.g., an attack) by making the initial movements of that action. Since the point is no longer to perform the action but just to display an intention "conventionally", the cost in terms of physical effort and possible damage may be reduced to a minimum. Again, an agent gets away with the cheapest possible way of attaining a conventional value.

That there are parallels between ritualization as understood by ethologists and grammaticalization in natural languages has been suggested before, notably by Haiman (1994). According to Haiman, the factor that is crucial to ritualization is repetition, which, according to him, drives processes such as emancipation (from the original function), habituation, and automatization. Similarly, Bybee (forthcoming), referring to Haiman's discussion of ritualization, proposes that phonological changes of reduction and fusion are conditioned by the frequent repetition of items that undergo grammaticalization (grammaticization). She attributes an important role in this to processes of habituation and automatization of sequences of units in speech. Without denying the relevance of these factors, I would like to emphasize that the mechanism I am talking about here is slightly different.[2] What I want to argue is that the parts of an utterance that are most likely to be reduced are those

that contribute least to the intended message—those which have the lowest information load or value.

Consider a simple example. I am writing this in 1999; the phrase *in 1999* is thus something that I say very often and no doubt it is highly routinized for me and for other speakers. Its will also tend to have a reduced pronunciation; people may even prefer to say just *ninety-nine* pronounced something like [nə̃ti'nəin]. But suppose now that the number of my office telephone extension is 1999. It may well be that I have to say this several times every day; still, the chances are that I will go on pronouncing this very distinctly, preserving all the syllables and stresses: ['naintiːn nainti'nain]. The obvious reason is that in contrast to the number of the year, the extension number is wholly unpredictable for my listeners and any reduction might put comprehension in danger.

What this example illustrates is the principle of *redundancy management* (my translation of the term *Redundanzsteuerung* from Lüdtke [1980]), by which we keep a balance between two separate strivings: to minimize the cost of a message and to maximize its chances of being properly delivered (i.e., understood), keeping in mind that a secure delivery demands a certain degree of redundancy. Redundancy management is what makes us pronounce telephone numbers distinctly and the number of the current year sloppily; in general, it ensures that every expression gets the resources it deserves. In the development of lexical and grammatical patterns, it restrains the tendencies to reduce the resources spent on the expression of a pattern.

The term "information load" conflates several different but related phenomena. To start with, we have the information-theoretical consideration that a high degree of unpredictability demands a more elaborate message expression, since the receiver needs more help in choosing between the alternative interpretations. This is what lies behind redundancy management. But there is an additional dimension in human communication, that is the prominence that is given to a message or parts of it. Prominence is used by speakers to guide the attention of listeners to elements that are worth paying attention to—important news items get fatter headlines. In speech, prosodic mechanisms have an essential role to play in the process of what I would like to call *prominence management*, to introduce a parallel term to "redundancy management". In actual practice, it is often difficult to keep redundancy and prominence management apart. Highly unexpected news items also tend to be those that are worth paying attention to. Redundancy and prominence management have in common that they both operate on listeners' expectations.

It follows that an expression is most likely to undergo reduction in a situation where a discrepancy has arisen between the cost of a message and its information load. One case in point is the use of expressions for politeness reasons that we saw

examples of. But we can see that the routine use of an intensifying modifier, as in Mandarin Chinese, will have the same effect: the modifier no longer carries the information load that it did originally.

There is an obvious relation to frequency here in that high-frequency items are likely to have a lighter information load. In the literature, this is often expressed in terms of enhanced predictability. It should be pointed out, though, that the relationship between high frequency and predictability is less straightforward than is sometimes thought. The reason is that we have to distinguish the predictability of a linguistic item from the predictability of the information it carries. Consider, for instance, the old principle of journalism which says that when a dog bites a man, it is not news, but when a man bites a dog, it is. This is based on the empirical observation that dogs bite humans more frequently than vice versa. Thus, the content of the message 'man bites dog' has a higher information value than that of 'dog bites man'. But precisely for this reason it is more likely to show up as a headline in a newspaper, which means that in fact 'man bites dog' may be more frequent as a linguistic item. Similarly, when speaking, we tend to leave out items that carry predictable information. This presents a challenge for anyone who wants to explain grammaticalization and similar processes. Grammatical markers tend to carry little or no information that is relevant to the message, yet they may be retained as high-frequency items in a language for millennia. In the case of politeness items such as Russian *-s*, it is obvious that it is not the intrinsic information load of the expression that keeps them in the language but rather the external pressure on speakers not to violate norms that are considered important for the preservation of a hierarchical society.[3] Likewise, in the Swedish restaurant example, there was an external norm that forced the guests to order food with their drinks.

Explaining the persistence of grammatical markers by the existence of a norm looks like begging the question, however, as long as there is no independent motivation for the norm itself. Eventually, the theory has to provide such a motivation; for the time being, the most important thing may be to realize that it is needed.

In this paper, I have used the notion of inflation, as understood in economics, as a starting-point for a discussion of some processes by which the information load of linguistic expressions and constructions decreases. In another paper (Dahl forthcoming) I introduced the term *rhetorical devaluation* for those processes. As we have seen, rhetorical devaluation, in its different forms, is involved in grammaticalization in essential ways:

1. An expression which expresses a strong value of some parameter may be used even when a weaker value is called for.
2. A construction whose function is to draw attention to an element whose content

is counter to expectation is also used for elements which are not counter to expectation.

3. An expression may be used even when the information it carries is irrelevant (does not belong to the intended message) or predictable (presupposed or inferrable).

All these devaluations have the effect that they change the cost-benefit calculation that a speaker makes, paving the way for reduction and condensation processes.

The question now arises: are there also processes that work in the opposite direction—"linguistic deflation" or "rhetorical revaluation"? The original examples I gave of linguistic inflation were due to the short-term advantages of over-using certain kinds of expressions such as evaluative adjectives. Clearly, in some situations, it may be advantageous for a user to avoid too strong expressions, especially in connection with negative evaluations. If you hear someone say *It may be a little difficult* you may well conclude that the intended meaning is *What you propose is totally impossible*. In "understatement" cultures, the tendency to avoid strong words may extend also to positive statements. Thus, an utterance like *That's not so bad* may in fact be the highest possible praise. It seems clear that phrases of this kind may be lexicalized, as in the expression *not half* 'extremely'. Consider also the conversational implicature 'average → not too good', which seems to have been conventionalized in the word *mediocre*, which in spite of sharing its root with words like *medium* is defined by Merriam-Webster as "of moderate or *low* [my italics] quality, value, ability, or performance". In fact, it has been argued that "pragmatic enrichment", which would involve precisely the conventionalization of conversational implicatures, plays a significant role particularly in the early stages of grammaticalization (cf. Traugott and König 1991, Hopper and Traugott 1993, and, for that matter, my own discussion of conventionalization of implicatures Dahl 1985: 11[4]). Traugott and König (1991) even use the term "strengthening of informativeness" in this connection. A standard example is the development from temporal to causal connectives, as in English *since*. It is tempting to make the following generalization about these cases and the ones discussed earlier in this paper: sometimes a speaker means more than s/he says, sometimes less. In the end, however, it is what the listener actually gets out of the utterance—what it "buys" him/her—that matters. On the other hand, in the same way as inflation is more common than deflation in economics, the general tendency seems to be toward decrease rather than increase in pragmatic or rhetorical strength over time.

## Notes

1. Regrettably, I have not had access to the original French text.

2. In the example of display behavior mentioned in the main text the reduction of the action is indeed a necessary condition for the emancipation to go through. The message sent to the enemy is "Go away, or I'll attack you". Essentially this is an offer of a peaceful solution of the conflict, which would be directly contradicted by an actual attack. At least in this particular type of example, habituation and automatization thus seem less relevant for the explanation of reduction processes. Haiman and Bybee do not mention this aspect of the problem.

3. A nice example of how rather a different kind of norm can give rise to the need for redundant expression is given in the Dilbert cartoon reproduced in Haiman (1994: 23).

4. Hopper and Traugott (1993: 75) ascribe to me the view that "present relevance" is a secondary meaning of the English perfect that has arisen in this way. Actually, in the place quoted, I am talking about "inferential" interpretations of the perfect, not about present relevance.

## References

Ansaldo, U. 1999. *Comparative constructions in Chinese. Areal Typology and Patterns of Grammaticalization*. Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University.

Bybee, J. L. Forthcoming. 'Mechanisms of change in grammaticization: the role of frequency'. In *Handbook of Historical Linguistics*, R. Janda and B. Joseph (eds.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Dahl, Ö. 1985. *Tense and Aspect Systems*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Dahl, Ö. Forthcoming. 'Grammaticalization and the life-cycles of constructions'. To be published in a volume in the series RASK Supplement Volumes, Carl-Erik Lindberg (ed.). Odense: Odense University Press.

Dahl, Ö. and Koptjevskaja-Tamm, M. 1998. 'Alienability splits and the grammaticalization of possessive constructions'. In *Papers from the 16th Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics. Publications of the Department of Finnish and General Linguistics of the University of Turku 60*, T. Haukioja (ed.), 38–49. Turku: University of Turku.

Haiman, J. 1994. 'Ritualization and the Development of Language'. In *Perspectives on grammaticalization*, W. Pagliuca (ed.), 3–28. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Haspelmath, M. Forthcoming. 'Why is grammaticalization irreversible?' *Linguistics*.

Heine, B., Claudi, U., and Hünnemeyer, F. 1991. *Grammaticalization: A Conceptual Framework*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hopper, P. J. and Traugott, E. 1993. *Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keller, R. 1994. *Language Change: The Invisible Hand in Language*. London: Routledge.

Lüdtke, H. 1980. 'Auf dem Wege zu einer Theorie des Sprachwandels'. In *Kommunikationstheoretische Grundlagen des Sprachwandels*, H. Lüdtke (ed.), 182–252. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Schlegel, A. W. von. 1818. *Observations sur la Language et Littérature Provençales*. Paris: Librairie Grecque-Latine-Allemande.

Traugott, E. C. and König, E. 1991. 'The semantics-pragmatics of grammaticalization revisited'. In *Approaches to Grammaticalization*, E. Traugott and B. Heine (eds.), 189–218. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Wälchli, B. Manuscript. 'Towards a Typology of Co-Compounds and Natural Coordination'. Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University.